A Supreme Social Reformer

Guru Ram Singh

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The Tribune 31 Aug 2002

I wonder how many people in India have heard or read about the Kuka movement and its think tank Guru Ram Singh. This piece of history too is buried quite like the heroic deeds of many an unsung or little sung heroes of our nation.

Kukas, also known as Namdharis, are a sect of puritanical Sikhs who strictly adhere to the teachings of the Sikh gurus. It was somewhere after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 that Kukas began to emerge as a separate sect and eventually created a place for themselves in the history of India's struggle for freedom. Their Guru Ram Singh was not only a religious philosopher but a die-hard patriot too. A great visionary, he could foresee that only men of high moral character, enthused with patriotic spirit, would be able to fight the British and win back India's freedom.

Guru Ram Singh had reached this conclusion for he had witnessed the downfall of the sovereign state of Punjab in the post-Maharaja Ranjit Singh era. To attain his objective, he began building a puritanical sect called the Kukas. It is amazing that Guru Ram Singh mixed religion with politics in the most constructive manner. On the one hand, he gave religious discourses to his followers, and on the other, he lent a political flavour to the sermons, thereby building the morale of his followers to fight the British.

Although the whole world and more specifically present-day India associates the non-co-operation movement with Gandhiji, the historical truth is that it was Guru Ram Singh who first evolved non-co-operation as a political weapon against the British. Gandhiji revived it, as many as 60 years later. Unfortunately, Guru Ram Singh has not been given credit for the same, except in history books.

The following were some of the edicts (political in nature) of Guru Ram Singh to his followers:

Do not accept any government service offered by the British.

Boycott all educational institutions opened by the British.

Do not use any foreign-made goods.

Refuse to obey and resist the laws and orders that your conscience abhors.

Boycott the law courts started by the British.

Do not use the British government postal services.

Guru Ram Singh's instructions (social in nature) to his followers were amazingly progressive for his times. Following are a few of them:

Do not indulge in infanticide or trade in female children.

Do not do child marriages.

Do not lie or steal or indulge in adultery.

Abstain from intoxicants like alcohol, tobacco or any drugs.

Do not give or take dowry. (He had forbidden his followers from spending more than Rs 13 at a wedding).

Do not borrow or lend money on interest.

Protect cows and all other animals from slaughter and do not castrate bulls.

Guru Ram Singh was a staunch critic of Sikh princes and landowners, who, he felt, were indulging in self-promotion rather than saving the nation from the clutches of the British. He also strongly condemned casteism and idolatry. His relentless efforts to make his followers great patriots bore fruit and Namdharis/Kukas became a force to be reckoned with.

The British uneasiness is evident from the Malerkotla massacre of 1872. A clash between Kukas and a Sikh zamindar was used by the then Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana, L. Cowan, to not only teach a lesson to Kukas but also to send signals to all other anti-British forces. He arrested 68 Kukas and without any trial, blew up 66 of them by tying them to the mouths of canons.

Cowan had written a note to his Commissioner T. D. Forsythe, saying: "They are open rebels, offering contumacious resistance to constituted authority, and, to prevent the spreading of the disease, it is absolutely necessary that repressive measures should be prompt and stern. I am sensible of the great responsibility I incur; but I am satisfied that I act for the best, and that this incipient insurrection must be stamped out at once."

The Commissioner replied: "My dear Cowan, I fully approve and confirm all you have done. You have acted admirably. I am coming out." Forsythe and Cowan then jointly blew up another 16 imprisoned Kukas the next day. Close on the heels, Guru Ram Singh, the founder of the Kuka movement, and 11 of his followers were arrested and deported to Burma and all Kuka assemblies were banned.

Guru Ram Singh was succeeded by his younger brother, Hari Singh. The British did not allow Guru Hari Singh out of his Bhaini village, near Ludhiana, which was to be the main base of the Kukas for the next 21 years. On his death in 1906, Guru Hari Singh was succeeded by his son, Guru Partap Singh, who in turn was succeeded by the present Guru Jagjit Singh.

I must say that if there were British officers like Cowan, Forsythe or General Dyer, who ordered deaths in the most dictatorial, authoritarian and cruel manner, there were also some British men who at least made an attempt to deliver justice. Blowing off the Kukas had an electrifying effect both in India and England. While the then Maharaja of Patiala defended the action against the Kukas, the British Government in India termed it as "illegal and indiscriminate" and dismissed Cowan for the same. Forsythe was debarred from all future political employment. Haviland Burke raised questions in the British Parliament, "Were the Kukas tied and blown from guns? Did their trial take place or not"? The

Secretary of the State, Grant, confessed, "I regret to say that there was no trial of any sort and Kukas were blown off without trial."

The Namdharis/Kukas must also be credited with creating the concept of Panchayati Raj. It was Guru Ram Singh who had adapted and evolved this system for his followers. When the Kukas boycotted British courts, the panchayats settled all their social disputes.

Allow me to transport you to the present-day existence of Namdharis/Kukas. Their headquarters continue to be at Bhaini village and the followers have by and large lead a life that is not contaminated by greed, corrupt practices, consumerist tendencies, alcoholism, drug addition, etc. You have to visit them to know them. They maintain their gurdwaras in a simple manner. There is no ostentatious display of rich canopies or silk coverings for the *Guru Granth Sahib*. They also do not indulge in any rituals smacking of idolatry. They do not wear any ornaments and lead an austere life, dressing in white, handloom khadi.

I think all women organisations in India, striving to end gender discrimination, should join hands to perpetuate the memory of Guru Ram Singh. He had the vision and conviction in 1830-40 to have drilled in the minds of his followers that women and men were equal. That girls should be educated like boys. He forbade child marriages and initiated re-marriages of the widows. He baptised women along with men on the same platform. On June 3, 1863, he himself solemnised six inter-caste marriages in Khote village of Ferozepore district. He also succeeded in eroding from amongst his followers the draconian practice of infanticide of the girl child. Paying a befitting tribute to him, Sardar Kapur Singh, ICS, wrote: "Guru Ram Singh should be rated as one of the supreme social reformers for having restored women’s dignity and equality."